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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [GA](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH  
PRESIDENT JAMMEH

REF: Banjul 45

Classified By: Ambassador Barry L. Wells  
for reasons 1.4(b) & (d)

Summary  
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¶1. (C) Ambassador had a 2 hour meeting with President Jammeh on a wide range of issues, including the current state of bilateral relations, drug trafficking in the region, future assistance for The Gambia and the inquiry by Senator Durbin on the case of missing journalist Chief Manneh. Jammeh reconstructed history to claim that the downturn in relations related to his decision to invite Hugo Chavez when he hosted the African Union Summit in 2006, shared our concern about increasing drug trafficking, and deflected inquiries regarding Chief Manneh, while criticizing the way we do human rights reporting.

¶2. (U) Ambassador, accompanied by OMS as notetaker, met with President Jammeh on February 24, 2009. Sitting in on the meeting were Secretary General Teneng Jaiteh; Minister of Finance Musa Bala-Gaye; Minister of Local Government, Lands and Religious Affairs Ismaila Sambou; and Minister of Culture and Tourism Nancy Njie. While waiting for the President in a VIP lounge, Ambassador and Finance Minister discussed the current global financial crisis; Bala-Gaye admitted some concerns about lower foreign remittances, but was not specific.

The Tides of History According to Jammeh  
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¶3. (C) After exchanging pleasantries, the President began the meeting by congratulating the Ambassador on President Obama's election and the USG's new Administration. The President claimed it was an historic victory for America. He went on to say he hoped this meant a better relationship between the Gambia and the United States. President Jammeh went on to say that he had nothing against the U.S., but that during previous US Ambassador's tenure, relations between the USG and The Gambia were "high tide, low tide". President Jammeh then said that despite the policies of the last four years of President Bush's Administration, he remains 'personal friends' with President Bush although he did not support Bush's policies.

¶4. (C) President Jammeh continued on the

topic of bilateral relations, saying that the door is open to improve the bilateral relationship between The Gambia and the United States. He stressed, however, that he would not change his policies or beliefs in order to improve upon that relationship. He said he would instead 'find other countries to work with'. He said he expects 'nothing' from the United States. He did say to the Ambassador that his wish is to work together with the U.S. He said things went very bad when he hosted the AU summit in 2006. Jammeh mentioned he'd invited President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela to speak at the summit. Jammeh mentioned that Chavez was looking for a forum within Africa where he could forge a relationship between South America and the African Continent. Jammeh felt that The Gambia would be a good venue because there were many people of African descent in South America. The President then went on to say that the US Ambassador informed him that Washington claimed it was unacceptable to invite Chavez to The Gambia and that Washington would view it as a "hostile act because Chavez was a sworn enemy to the U.S." He was told this would result in the suspension of The Gambia's MCC eligibility. The President then went on to say that as a result of hosting Chavez, The Gambia was suspended from the Millennium Challenge Corporation two days prior to Chavez' arrival.

#### Iran, Venezuela and Visas

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15. (C) The President then went on to talk about the issue of Iran and Venezuela. The President said that one country does not have the right to define who another country befriends. He said that The Gambia's relationship with Iran and Venezuela has nothing to do with the United States' relationship with Iran or Venezuela. He said his country was being punished for befriendng countries that are not friends of the US. Ambassador pointed out that Iran's behavior in the international community was irrational and detrimental to peace. It would certainly concern us if other countries were accepting of their views and their friendship.

16. (U) The President then switched to a discussion about how Gambian Government Officials were having difficulty obtaining U.S. Visas. The President said he'd advised government officials to have a 'contingency plan' if seeking a U.S. visa for other than official travel, including those Officials who were seeking visas for medical purposes. He was advising them to go to other countries. Ambassador pointed out that there was a procedure in place for GOTG officials to request expedition of their visas through the Foreign Ministry, but that it was rarely used. The Ambassador said that he had discussed this with both the Foreign Minister and the Speaker of the National Assembly.

#### Reaction to Past HRR

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17. (C) Jammeh said that nothing hurt him

more than the Human Rights report of 2007 that accused him of executing people. He said the best way to punish people was to keep them alive and referred to people on death row in The Gambia that he would not execute. He went on to discuss his Muslim faith and said that people will be judged not by man but in the next life. Ambassador said he respected the President's faith and reminded him that as a head of state the here and now were equally important, and that if these reports are not true they should be addressed and refuted with evidence.

#### Jammeh on Regional Drug Trafficking

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18. (C) Ambassador raised the issue of the increased drug trafficking in the region. Jammeh responded with an anecdote about having been approached by a person who said he did not want the President to "miss out" on an opportunity his counterparts in the region were taking advantage of. The request was a bald-faced attempt to get him involved in drug trafficking, by guaranteeing that traffickers would not be prosecuted or convicted in The Gambia. The President went on to say he had 'zero tolerance' for drugs. He said he made a 'big mistake' once when he was approached by 'someone' and offered 3 million US dollars a month if he would allow planes carrying drugs to land in The Gambia and be escorted to waiting vessels at the Port for trans-shipment to the U.S. and Europe. The President indicated he was so angry with the individual who approached him with this offer that he failed to ask the individual for information on which aircraft and vessels he was alluding to. The President said that the drug phenomenon will be very difficult to eradicate in West Africa as long as certain heads of state are in power, as some of them and their families are involved in drug trafficking. He said the late President Conte of Guinea Conakry confided in him that his (Conte's) son was involved in trafficking and lamented that the Guinean police would not arrest his son because of his position. Jammeh added his belief that the attempted coup in Guinea-Bissau was actually a drug deal gone bad when 5 tons of cocaine turned up missing while it was in police custody.

19. (C) Jammeh said he had directed his NIA and other law enforcement authorities to continue to cooperate with the U.S. on the drug problem. He said the drug unit particularly needed assistance with forensics as they have no capability in this area.

#### Jammeh without an Audience

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110. (C) In a one on one meeting after the notetaker and Ministers had left, Ambassador raised the issue of missing journalist Chief Manneh. Jammeh then went on a lengthy monologue about the Manneh case. He said he was unaware that Manneh had done or said anything against the Government of The Gambia or the President. He said Manneh was a Daily Observer reporter assigned to State House at the

time of his disappearance. All he knew was that Manneh was recalled from State House at some point by his bosses; he did not know the reason. (Note: Jammeh himself actually controls The Observer, which is owned by one of his well-known front men.) He said that when the government has problems with journalists, they take them to court. He then referred to the recent arrest of Pap Saine, publisher of The Point newspaper as an example of the legal way they deal with journalists (reftel).

¶11. (U) On the matter of the ECOWAS Court ruling, he reiterated what the SOS for Foreign Affairs had said in an earlier meeting with me: that the court had no jurisdiction as it can only intervene when all local judicial remedies have been exhausted which was not the case. He said the GOTG did not appear at the court because it was not a true legal proceeding, in Jammeh's (and therefore The Gambia's) opinion. Ambassador pointed out that failure to respond to these issues does not make them go away, and reminded the president that he (Ambassador) has spoken publicly many times about the importance and role of a free press in a democracy. Ambassador said this is an issue that the Government needs to address.

¶12. (U) The President went on to criticize the US for relying on the 'lies' printed in the online Echo and Freedom media. Jammeh said that the publishers of these on-line newspapers aren't even considered by the government to be from the legitimate opposition, rather, they are dissidents. They go to the US and marry US citizens and start writing their Congressmen, he said. Ambassador pointed out that he should give the US credit for having better sources of information than the online media to which he referred. Ambassador mentioned the Amnesty International report which, after making a visit to the Gambia, was highly critical of a 'climate of fear' as it related to public freedoms.

¶13. (U) Ambassador pointed out the inquiries from Senator Durbin, who has yet to get a response to his letter to the Gambian Embassy in Washington, or to the personal letter to President Jammeh. Ambassador indicated that Senator Durbin was planning to contact him directly, which Jammeh said was "inappropriate". Ambassador indicated that these issues are important and indicative of the level of freedom that exist in a country; The Gambia needs to be aware that failure to address these issues could affect our relationship and the possibility of future assistance.

Comment  
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¶14. (C) The lengthy meeting was generally positive, with Jammeh being very generous with his time going over past issues such as MCC suspension, accusations of human rights abuses, and what he saw as a deliberate U.S. policy of offering asylum to anyone who would criticize him and his government. He pointed to several unnamed Gambians implicated in the 2006 coup that were now living in the US writing all the

bad stories about him and his Government. Jammeh was positive about the current state of relations and the support the US has provided to the military in the way of training. He seems sincere in saying that he has instructed his law enforcement authorities to continue to cooperate with our counternarcotics efforts. On the issue of general freedoms and liberty, Jammeh is indeed paranoid about enemies in and around his government, but as they say, just because a person is paranoid, doesn't mean people aren't out to get him. Jammeh lives in constant fear that his enemies or ambitious men with guns will move to oust him, just as he ousted resident Jawara in 1994. His centralized, authoritarian style is only slightly masked by the democratic electoral process, which is badly flawed. We will continue to use the access we have worked so hard to restore to raise the tough issues that others here will not or cannot. However, our leverage is limited. Iranian, Taiwanese and Cuban assistance far outweighs anything we are doing here, and the money is certainly talking. Nonetheless, Jammeh remains pro-Western at heart, and values our friendship and what we say. He would like to have a strong relationship with us, as he sees others with similar human rights records on the continent have. This remains the only leverage we have to address our primary democracy and human rights concerns.

BACHMAN